

Nothing can be Known or Done without the Involvement of Angels: Angels and Angelology in Islam and Islamic Literature

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As the title of this article suggests angels play a very significant role in Islamic belief system, philosophy and mysticism. Accordingly, we shall address these three aspects as follows:

(1) How the angels and Islamic religious angelology, on the basis of the *Qur'ān*, Traditions (*Ahādīth*, sing., *Hadīth*), came to be understood in the formative period of Islam that becomes the foundation of Islamic religious view of angels in Islam. We present here all vital *Qur'ānic* verses regarding the angels and their nature, but only a few of the most important Traditions, since they are vast and more complex than the *Qur'ān*.

(2) How the Neo-platonic doctrine of Illumination came to be employed in Islamic philosophical doctrine of cosmology replacing the idea of angel as the servant of God and messenger of His communication by the Neo-platonic idea of the Angel as *Dii Angelii*.¹

(3) Finally, how this cosmological angelology becomes incorporated and interwoven into the doctrines of philosophically oriented Islamic mysticism.

From this it is evident that the main theme and purpose of this article is to elaborate on the importance and significance of the angels and angelology in the history of Islamic belief and thought, rather than presenting a new point of view or interpretation in the already-existing theories of Islamic angelology; though, when it is necessary, we shall try to clarify some of the ambiguities that exist among different views and mention what is the prevalent view among the majority of Muslims. Thus this article provides the systematic account of angels in the formative period of Islam and later how this notion of angelology developed in the literature of Islamic philosophy and mysticism.

1 Henry Corbin traces it back to the concept of *Dii Angelii* of Proclus. Corbin, Avicenna 50.

1.1 Angels and the Foundation of Angelology in the Formative Period

It goes without saying that angels occupy a central position in Islam, unlike Judaism and Christianity. Angels are one of the basic tenants in Islam and enter into the very definition of Islamic faith. One can formally become a Muslim by simply pronouncing profession of faith (*shahāda*): "There is but one God and Muhammad is His Prophet," but materially speaking, the Qur'an prescribes that as a Muslim one must believe in "God, the Day of Judgment, the angels, the book, and the messengers."² In another verse, the belief in angels is placed only second to the belief in God. "Each one (Muslim) of them believes in God, his angels, his books and his apostles."³ Thus faith in the existence of angels is obligatory (*wājib*).

The '*malā'ika*' (sing., *malak*) is an Arabic word and it means 'angels'. In all, the word '*malā'ika*' occurs eighty eight times in the *Qur'ān*. It occurs twice in a dual form, once for the angels *Harūt* and *Marūt*⁴ and the other time for Adam and Eve that they become angels.⁵ Najjār provides the list of the Sūras and verses, in which the word '*malā'ika*' occurs, as follows:

Sūra 2: 30, 31, 34, 98, 102, 161, 177, 210, 248, 285; Sūra 3: 18, 39, 42, 45, 80, 87, 124, 125; Sūra 4: 98, 136, 166, 172; Sūra 6: 8, 9, 50, 93, 111, 198; Sūra 7: 11, 20; Sūra 8: 9, 12, 50; Sūra 11: 12, 31; Sūra 12: 31; Sūra 13: 13, 23; Sūra 15: 7, 8, 28, 30; Sūra 16: 2, 28, 32, 49; Sūra 18: 50; Sūra 20: 116; Sūra 21: 103; Sūra 22: 75; Sūra 23: 24; Sūra 25: 7, 11, 22, 25; Sūra 37: 11; Sūra 38: 43, 56; Sūra 34: 40; Sūra 35: 1; Sūra 37: 149; Sūra 38: 71, 73; Sūra 39: 75; Sūra 41: 14; Sūra 42: 5; Sūra 43: 19, 53, 60; Sūra 47: 27; Sūra 51: 26, 27; Sūra 66: 4, 6; Sūra 69: 17; Sūra 70: 4; Sūra 74: 31; Sūra 78: 38; Sūra 79: 22; Sūra 97: 4.⁶

As described in the *Qur'ān*, the angels belong to the unseen world ('*ālam al-ghayb*)⁷; the knowledge of the angelic world is only with God. When they (unbelievers) asked: why is an angel not sent down with the Prophet Muhammad, God replied: "Had we sent down with him an angel, we should have sent him as a man; and we should certainly have caused them confusion."⁸ Thus, neither do human beings know the exact nature of angels nor have they seen them.

2 Sūra 2: 177.

3 Sūra 2: 285.

4 Sura 2: 96.

5 Sura, 7: 19.

6 Najjār, *Qisas an-Anbiyā* 18.

7 Bāqūrī, *Fi 'Ālam al-Rūh* 8.

8 Sūra 6: 9.

The angles, according to the religious view, are subtle and luminous bodies that perform difficult tasks and appear in various forms and shapes. They are intermediaries between the earthly and the divine world. They have wings and senses. God “made the angels, messengers with wings, — two, or, three, or four”.⁹ It is said in the *Hadīth* (Tradition) literature that God first created the four archangels Gabriel, Michael, Isrāfil and the Angel of Death (whose name is not mentioned in the *Qur’ān*) and they are the last to die.¹⁰ As any other created beings, so also the angels would die before the Day of Judgment and go through the trial before God: “All that is on Earth will perish, but will abide for ever the face of thy Lord.”¹¹ “And every soul (*nafs*) have taste of death, of judgment should you be paid full compence.”¹² On the basis of the Tradition narrated by ‘Ā’isha (the second wife of Prophet Muhammad), the religious view maintains that the angels were created of light, though the *Qur’ān* does not say it directly. This will be discussed later when we deal with the nature and functions of angels.

The angels have been created to worship God. The *Qur’ān* puts emphasis on their absolute obedience and submission to God: “and they act in all things by his Command (*amr*)”¹³ and they do what He commands. They are honored servants: “they are (but) servants raised to honor.”¹⁴

Generally, the angels are divided into two groups according to their role and the tasks they perform. One group of angles are those who are attendant on God and the other group of angels carry the divine decrees into operation that reveal their eschatological, epistemological as well as cosmological functions.

The angels in the first group are mentioned in the *Qur’ān* as ‘Brought Nigh’ (*muqarrbūn*) or the Bearers of the Throne¹⁵ who sustain the Throne of God and those around it sing glory and praise to God. These angels are nearest to God. They praise God day and night, without ceasing. “They celebrate His praises night and day, they do not ever flag or intermit.”¹⁶ These are the four angels in the form of an angel, a bull, a lion, and a man. To these four angels four more angels

9 Sūra 35: 1.

10 Ibn Kathīr, *Tuhfat al-Nabala’* 8.

11 Sūra 55: 26-27.

12 Sūra 3: 185.

13 Sūra 21: 27.

14 Sūra 21: 26.

15 Sūra 40: 7.

16 Sūra 21: 20.

would be added on the Day of Resurrection.¹⁷ There are several Traditions (*ahādīth*), as cited by Ibn Kathīr to this effect. For example, one of them runs as follows: "Every day seven thousand angels pray to God in the tomb that exists above in Heaven facing directly opposite to it the *Ka'ba* (on this earth)."¹⁸

Before discussing the individual angels in the second category whose functions are mainly in terms of eschatology, epistemology and cosmology, it needs to be mentioned at this point that there are three places in the *Qur'ān* where an unusual phrase '*rūh*' (Spirit) occurs simultaneously with the word 'angel'. The authorities differ in their interpretation of this phrase. These three verses are as follows: The first verse is "The Day that the Spirit and the angels will stand forth in the ranks,"¹⁹ the second one is "the angels and the Spirit ascend unto Him in a day,"²⁰ and the last one is "Therein came down the angels and the Spirit by God's permission upon every Command (*amr*)."²¹ The prevalent religious view is that the Spirit (*rūh*) refers to the angel Gabriel. Baydawi, on the other hand, is perplexed with the phrase. For him, the Spirit is either an angel set over the spirits (*arwāh*) or he is the whole genus of the Spirits, suggesting that the Spirit is a creation superior to the angels.²² No wonder, al-Qazwīnī, the author of '*Ajā'ib al-Makhlūqāt*', considers the Spirit as occupying one rank and the remaining angels together occupy another rank. He is given the charge of governing the spheres, the planets and everything beneath the moon, in other words, all the affairs of heaven and earth.²³ But, whether it is religious, philosophical or Islamic mysticism, they all hold the opinion of the superiority of Gabriel over other angels like the superiority of Prophet Muhammad over other Prophets. Of particular interest is that beginning with Qazwīnī, angels are not only messengers of God, but their role also becomes extended from simply eschatological and epistemological functions to the cosmological functions.

However, in the formative period and especially in the *Qur'ān* and Traditions, the importance of the angel Gabriel lies in bringing revelation to the Prophets. The *Qur'ān* itself is revealed to the Prophet Muhammad through Gabriel, who is described as the faithful Spirit (*Rūh*

17 Murata, Angels 326.

18 Ibn Kathīr, *Tuhfa* 82-83.

19 Sūra 78: 38.

20 Sūra 70: 4.

21 Sūra 97: 4.

22 Sweetman, Islam 76.

23 Murata, Angels 326.

al-Amīn)²⁴ and dignified as the Spirit. He is identified with the Holy Spirit (Rūh al-Quddūs) who "has brought the revelation from thy Lord."²⁵ "Then we sent to her (Mary) our Spirit (Gabriel), and he appeared before her as a man in all respects."²⁶ This Holy Spirit is not to be confused with the Holy Spirit of the Christian doctrine of Trinity. There is also a verse which seems to suggest that Gabriel and Michael are placed in the same rank "Whoever is an enemy to God and His angels and apostles, to Gabriel and Michael, Lo! God is an enemy to those who reject faith."²⁷ But it is obvious from the context that the verse is not concerned here so much with the angels, their status and functions; rather it puts the emphasize on faith, drawing attention to the fact that anyone who does not believe in what is specified by the Qur'ān, is not a believer.

It is said that the angels are unseen beings, but "Prophet Muhammad had seen Gabriel on two occasions in the visible form, though he (Gabriel) had visited him a hundred times or more."²⁸ The first occasion was when Chapter Recitation (*Sūra Iqrā'*) was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. The second was at the Prophet Muhammad's Ascension (*Mi'rāj*) when Gabriel acted as a guide on the Night of Ascension. The Ascension appearance was near the Lot tree in the highest Heaven, above which is the throne of God. These were the only two occasions when Gabriel appeared in the visible form to the Prophet Muhammad. This is based on the Tradition narrated on the authority of 'Ā'isha (second wife of the Prophet Muhammad) that he (the Prophet) did not see Gabriel in his visible form as God has created him except twice. The Prophet saw him landing from the Heaven to the Earth.²⁹ There is a Tradition narrated on the authority of Ibn Mas'ūd that Prophet Muhammad saw Gabriel with seven hundred wings. Another Tradition also narrated on the authority of ibn Mas'ūd describes that the Prophet saw Gabriel flapping his wings between Heaven and Earth.³⁰

24 Sūra 6: 2.

25 Sūra 16: 102.

26 Sūra 19: 17.

27 Sūra, 2: 98.

28 'Abduh, Tafsīr 163.

29 Ibn Kathīr, Tuhfa 85.

30 Ibn Kathīr, Tuhfa 85.

1.2 Angels, Prophets, and Human Beings

In general the status of human beings and, for certain, that of the Prophets is considered higher than that of the angels. This is based on the fact that human beings are given the gift of knowledge, as when God created Adam, "He taught Adam the names (nature) of all things; then He placed them before angels and said: Tell me the names of these They said: Glory to Thee, of knowledge we have none save what Thee has taught us."³¹ Moreover, humans are considered free to choose, whereas the angels are created by nature to be obedient. There is a Tradition in which it is said "God created the angels from intellect, and mankind both from intellect and sensuality. So when a person's intellect overcomes his sensuality, he is better than the angels; but when his sensuality overcomes his intellect, he is worse than beasts."³²

1.3 Individual Angels

Michael:

Though Michael is mentioned in the *Qur'ān* in the same vein as Gabriel as we discussed, his function and status is considered different from that of Gabriel. As already mentioned, it is narrated in the Tradition that he is one of the four angels whom God created first. Al-Qazwīnī, the author of *'Ajā'ib al-Makhlūqāt*, identifies³³ him as standing above the ocean filled with swell (*al-Bahr al-Masjūr*)³⁴ although the *Qur'ān* itself does not say so. Michael is also considered as being in charge of providing nourishment for the bodies and knowledge for the souls.

Angel of Death:

Among the four angels, which God created first, the Angel of Death (*Malak al-Maut*) is one of them, but he is not mentioned by name in the *Qur'ān*. He is identified by al-Qazwīnī as Izrā'il.³⁵

Isrāfil:

Isrāfil is also one of the first four angels created by God. He is considered in the Islamic legend as the one who will blow his trumpet on the Day of Resurrection. It is said that when God wants something to take

31 Sūra 2: 31-32.

32 Murata, Angels 338.

33 Murata, Angels 328.

34 Sūra 52: 6.

35 Murata, Angels 328.

place in the universe, he causes the Pen to write it on the Tablet, which is situated between Isrāfil's two eyes. Thereupon, Isrāfil relays the command to Michael. Here we see clearly these epistemological, cosmological and other functions carried out by the intervention of the angels rather than God causing them directly by Himself.

The Attendant and Guardian Angels:

These angels are appointed over human beings to protect them. "They pray for forgiveness for all human beings on earth."³⁶ Over every soul there is a watcher: "There is no soul but has a protector over it"³⁷ "Kind and honorable — writing down (your deeds); they know (and understand) all that ye do."³⁸ To this Prophet Muhammad added "(T)hey mind your works: when work is good, they praise God and when one is evil, they ask Him to forgive you."³⁹

The Angels of Seven Heavens:

On the authority of Ibn 'Abbās, al-Qazwīnī describes in his *'Ajā'ib al-Makhlūqāt* the forms of these angels and gives the name of the angel in charge of each heaven, beginning with the sphere of moon as follows: cattle, Ismā'il; eagles, Michael; vultures, Sā'ida'il; horses, Salsā'il; hories, Kalkā'il; heavenly youths, Gilmān; and mankind, Rūfa.⁴⁰

Munkar and Nakīr:

We find no mention or reference in the *Qur'ān* of *Munkar* and *Nakīr*, who visit the dead person in his tomb and examine him as to his faith. The faithful and pious person will be left alone till the Day of Resurrection, but for others the punishment (*'adāb*) and the pressure (*daghta*) will begin immediately in the grave itself. The punishment in the grave is mentioned very frequently in the Traditions though, often, without mentioning the names of angels. This might be the reason that the *Fiqh Akbar* I (article 10), the *Fiqh Akbar* II (article 23) and *Wasīyat Abī Hanīfa* (articles 18 and 19) emphasize that the interrogation by *Munkar* and *Nakīr* is a reality and the punishment in the tomb shall take place without fail.⁴¹

36 Sūra 42:5.

37 Sūra 86: 4.

38 Sūra 82: 11-12.

39 Murata, Angels 325.

40 Murata, Angels 328.

41 Wensinck, Munkar 216.

Hārūt and Mārūt:

It is said in the *Qur'ān* that "the blasphemers were but evil ones teaching men magic, and such things as came down at Babylon to the angels *Hārūt* and *Mārūt*. But neither of these taught anyone such things without saying: we are only for trial. We do not blaspheme."⁴² According to the *Tafsīr Haqqānī*, which follows Baydawī and *Tafsīr Kabīr*, "the word 'angels' as applied to *Hārūt* and *Mārūt* is figurative. It means "good men, of knowledge, science (wisdom) and power."⁴³ We find in the literature of the *Qisas al-Anbiyā* (Tales of the Prophets) detailed descriptions narrated on the authority of several Traditions that when the angels saw the increasingly ugly deeds and sins of the children of Adam, during the time of Idrīs (Enoch), they started complaining about it. Therefore, God said "If I had sent you down on earth and instilled in you what I have instilled in them, you would have acted as they have." Making a long story short, the two angels, *Hārūt* and *Mārūt*, the most pious and worshipful of the angels, were chosen to be sent down to earth with God instilling in them the passion (*shahwa*), which he had instilled in Adam. Thus, they were sent down to earth to experience the trial, which Adam and after him humankind is going through. *Hārūt* and *Mārūt*, like so many human beings, committed the sin of blasphemy, adultery, drinking wine, and murder and, now, are suffering punishment in Babylon.⁴⁴

Angels and Iblīs:

As already discussed, the *Qur'ān* lays stress on the absolute submission and obedience of the angels to God and they always do what he commands, except Iblīs, whose name had been 'Āzāzīl.⁴⁵ God asked the angels: "Bow down to Adam and they did bow down; not so Iblīs. He refused and was haughty. He was one of those who rejected faith."⁴⁶ When God asked him what prevented him from obeying His command (*amr*); the answer Iblīs' gave was "I am better than he (Adam). Thou didst create me from fire and him from clay."⁴⁷ There is also a Tradition narrated on the authority of 'Ā'īsha that the angels are created from light (*nūr*), Iblīs from smoke of fire (*min mārg min nār*) and Adam from clay (*tīn*).⁴⁸ On the basis of this, the religious view maintains that Iblīs

42 Sūra 2: 102.

43 Ali, Holy 45.

44 See al-Qazwīnī, 'Ajā'ib al-Makhlūqāt 99-102; al-Tha'labī, 'Ārā'is 87-91.

45 al-Tha'labī, 'Ārā'is 87.

46 Sūra 2: 34.

47 Sūra 7: 2.

48 Bāqūrī, 'Ālam al-Rūh 9.

was made out of fire in contrast to the angels who are made out of light. But this is contradictory as God commanded the angels to bow down before Adam and only Iblīs refused to obey His command. From this it follows that Iblīs should be made of the same substance as the other angels, namely, light and not fire. If we accept this argument, we run into another difficulty. If he is made from light, he is considered an angel, since angels are made from light. But then another question arises: If Iblīs was an angel, he could not have disobeyed God's command, as angels, by their very nature, are obedient. They do everything by God's permission⁴⁹ and what he commands. It is only humans who are given the freedom of choice and thereby they are considered by most of the authorities as being higher than the angels. Most probably, for this reason the later speculation put forth by al-Qazwīnī explains that the angels were made from light (of fire), jinn from the flames of fire, and Satan from the smoke of fire.⁵⁰ Eichmann also cites another verse in support of this view: "And He created *jān* (collective noun for the *jinn*) from fire free of smoke (*min mārg min nār*). Thus, it is for this reason that Iblīs is sometimes placed in the category of angels and other times he is considered *jinn*. But the Mutakallimūns (Muslim Scholastic Theologians) though they denied the reality of the incorporeal substantial beings, did teach that the angels, *jinn*s and devils are elusive thin bodies capable of assuming various forms and shapes. It is said of the Mu'tazilites (Muslim Rationalistic Thinkers) that they thought the angels were one species but were different accordingly as their action differed. Those doing nothing but good are 'angels', those doing nothing but evil are the *jinn*."⁵¹

From the above discussion it seems that Iblīs and Jinn were from fire, whether smokless fire or flames of fire but there is no clear and direct statement in the *Qur'ān* as to light being material from which the angels are created. The belief that they are created from light is based on the Tradition narrated on the authority of 'Ā'isha and afterwards this view gains ground because of the Doctrine of Angelology of the philosophically oriented mysticism that was associated with the *Qur'ānic* Sūra 24 known by the title *Nūr* (Light) as we shall discuss in the third section.

49 Sūra 97: 4.

50 Eickmann, Angelologie 19.

51 Baydāwī, Tawālīl-Anwar 647.

2. Philosophical Angelology

Perhaps Avicenna (d. 428/1037) is one of the best representatives of the Islamic philosophical angelology. Avicenna replaces the Islamic religious doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* with a complex cosmology in which the figure of the angel and the angelic world play a very significant role. Avicenna follows the Neo-platonic doctrine of emanation in interpreting and transforming the Islamic religious views on the angels by equating them with the hierarchy of the intellects with a specific angelology as well as the activities of all the angel-intellects, particularly the First Intellect and the Tenth Intellect.⁵² The process of emanation or creation is closely tied to the function and the significance of the angel; thereby the angel is the agency through which the act of creation is achieved. In Avicenna's cosmology and angelology which are closely interwoven, the angel has an epistemological function in attainment of knowledge as well cosmological function.⁵³

Regarding the epistemological function, Avicenna's hierarchy of angels corresponds to the gradation of Intelligences. He identifies the ten Intellects that form the hierarchy of the intelligible existence with ten angels, the lowest of whom is Gabriel, the Active Intellect who conveys revelation to the Prophets. He and the angels under his command are the intermediate source of every intelligible form that enters the human mind and thereby knowledge for human beings and, revelation in case of the Prophets, becomes possible.

As to the cosmological function, Avicenna describes the process of the creation of the universe in terms of the Neo-platonic doctrine of intellection in which through contemplation of higher orders that the lower ones comes into being. The universe is viewed as the eternal emanation from the One, the Necessary Being and the source of all beings. From the One emanates a being which is called the First Intellect (*'aql al-awwal*) and the First Caused (*al-ma'lul al-awwal*) who is made to correspond to the supreme Archangel and whose nature is described as pure immaterial intellect (*'aql mahd li annhu sūra lā fi mādda*), one and undivided like the Necessary Being and results from the contemplation of his own essence. As a result of the contemplation of the First Intellect, both of itself and the Necessary Being, there comes into being (i) Second Intellect or the Archangel (ii) soul or angel of the First Sphere or Heaven and (iii) the body of the sphere.⁵⁴ The whole process is contin-

52 Netton, Allah Transcendent 162-163.

53 Nasr, Sages 29.

54 Netton, Allah Transcendent 162-163.

ued through a succession of emanations culminating into the Tenth Intellect or Archangel. In the Avicennean angelology, one finds three kinds of angels:

The first category of angels is the Archangels or pure Intelligences. They stand highest in rank and are called by the philosophers active Intelligences and correspond to those that in the language of religion are spoken of as the angels closest to God (*malā'ika al-muqarrbūn*)⁵⁵ or Cherubs. In the *Risāla fī al-Malā'ika*, Avicenna gives the names of these Cherubs as follows: *Wajh al-Quds* (Face of Holiness), *Yaman al-Quds* (Hand of Holiness), *Mulk al-Quds* (Royalty of Holiness), *Sharaf al-Quds* (Nobility of Holiness), *Ba's al-Quds* (Rigor of Holiness), *Sanā al-Quds* (Brightness of Holiness), *Thaqaf al-Quds* (Sagacity of Holiness), *Rūh al-Quds* (Spirit of Holiness), and *'Abd al-Quds* (Servant of Holiness).

The second category of angels is called Angel-Souls and they are considered active angels. The names of these angels are given by Avicenna in the *Risāla fī al-Malā'ika* which are as follows: *Wajh al-'Izza* (Face of Magnificent), *Yaman al-'Izza* (Right Hand of Magnificent), *Mulk al-'Izza* (Royalty of Magnificent), *Sharaf al-'Izza* (Nobility of Magnificent), *Ba's al-'Izza* (Rigor of Magnificent), *Sanā al-'Izza* (Brightness of Magnificent), *Thaqaf al-'Izza* (Sagacity of Magnificent), *Rūh al-'Izza* (Spirit of Magnificent), *'Abd al-'Izza* (Servant of Magnificent).⁵⁶

The third category of angels is represented by the Heavenly bodies. Of this class of angels, Avicenna remarks "it is said that the celestial spheres are living, reasonable, do not die, and living, immortal, is called angel."⁵⁷ These angels that act as intermediaries between God and His Prophets, are those that possess souls that act as souls of celestial spheres. They are the bearers of inspiration by which Prophets' potential intellect becomes active intellect.⁵⁸ This shows that in the Avicennian angelology the notion of angel is important not only for the cosmological functions but also for the epistemological function. Thus, without the involvement of the angels neither can anything be done nor can anything be known. This was understood in the religious language as 'the angels obey what God commands and they do everything by His permission'. However, this Avicennean cosmological scheme of angelology was not well received in Orthodox Islam and also it became, among other aspects of Avicenna's philosophy, an object of severe criticism in medieval Christian philosophical and theological

55 Afnan, Avicenna 185.

56 Corbin, Avicenna 62. Corbin has reproduced this list of angels from Avicenna's *Rasā'il fī al-Malā'ika*.

57 Afnan, Avicenna 185-186.

58 For a fuller account of how prophecy is possible in Islam see Rahman, Prophecy.

thought, since it makes God an indirect cause of creation. But this is not a place to undertake an investigation into it as it is in itself a separate subject of inquiry.

3. Angelology in Islamic Mysticism

It is not only the Islamic philosophical angelology that assimilated Neoplatonic emanation theory but, thereafter, it was also employed in philosophically orientated Islamic mysticism. Thus, among the philosophically inclined Islamic mystics, Abū Hāmid Muhammad al-Ghazālī (d. 435/1053) and Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191) were influenced by Avicennian philosophical angelology and later even developed a cosmological scheme that makes use of the *Qur'ān*, Traditions and the insights of Avicenna's notion of angels and angelology. Suhrawardī's cosmological scheme is closely interwoven with the Neo-platonic cosmological hierarchies with the hierarchy of lights (*anwār*, sing., *nūr*) that distinguishes the angelology in Islamic mysticism from that of philosophical angelology as it replaces the role of intellect (*'aql*) with light (*nūr*), otherwise structurally both have the same scheme.

Al-Ghazālī, while discussing Sūra 24, named as *Nūr* (Light), Verse 35 where God is declared to be "Light of the Heavens and Earth, the parable of light..." comes to refer to the Avicennian interpretation of the cosmological function of angels. According to Ghazālī, those who are veiled by pure light declare that God is the mover of only the *primum mobil* (the Ninth and outermost Heaven), which causes movement of the other Eight, mediated by their respective Angels.⁵⁹ al-Ghazālī seems to be reluctant to indulge into the secrets of it,⁶⁰ but asserts that the direct communion of motion to the celestial bodies must be an act of service to the Lord of the universe, an act of obedience to his Command (*amr*) and rendered by one of his creatures, the Angel Gabriel who stands over other visible lights; and with this the Command of God is indirectly obeyed and not by direct performance of it by God.⁶¹ Thus al-Ghazālī in his *Tahāfut* substitutes God, the Commander for Avicenna's Prime Mover and the First.⁶² In his *Mi'rāj al-Sālikīn*, al-Ghazālī admits the intellectual nature of the angels but under

59 Gairdner, *al-Ghazālī, Mishkāt al-Anwār* 12-13

60 Obviously the allusion is made to the Sūra 17, 85 "They ask thee concerning the Spirit (Gabriel): Say the Spirit cometh by Command of my Lord. Of knowledge it is only a little that is communicated to you."

61 al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār* 96.

62 Rahman, *Prophecy* 98.

the direct Command of God and not as quasi autonomous beings, as Avicenna does. Here al-Ghazālī also follows Avicenna's epistemological function of the angels and his notion of prophecy. "But for the intelligences known as angels which help the souls from outside these latter would not understand anything. For the (human) soul which is potentially cognizant is rendered actually so by the angels' actualization of its potentialities. The highest in rank in securing this help are the prophets...."⁶³

Whether al-Ghazālī agrees with the whole scheme of Avicennian angelology is an entirely different question. Our concern here is later Islamic mystics and especially the Ishrāqī School that follows Avicennian Neo-platonic doctrine of emanation. In this article we are going to confine our discussion to Suhrawardī's scheme of angelology.

Suhrawardī is rightly given the title of Shaykh al-Ishrāq as his whole system of angelology is viewed through the prism of emanation (Ishrāqī) scheme in which there is a complete identification of emanation, intellect, Archangel and light. Suhrawardī, despite relying heavily on the pre-Islamic Mazdean angelology, describes the various orders of angels in traditional Islamic terminology and especially the angel Gabriel who appears powerfully in his series of angelic types⁶⁴ that reflects the role that Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-Anwār* has played on his doctrine of light. More importantly, he is greatly indebted to Avicenna for the formulation of his ideas especially the Neo-platonic scheme of emanation and his later works known as Trilogy (*Hayy Ibn Yaqzān*, *Risālat al-Tā'ir* and *Salāmān*) in which the disciple passes from the Occident which is the world of matter, through the intermediate Occidents and Orients which are the Heavens, to the world of Archangels. In Suhrawardī's writings one finds the same division of cosmos between Occident and Orient; the Occident is the world of matter, in which man's soul is fallen as a prisoner and the Orient is the world of lights and Archangels above the visible cosmos which is the origin and the final destiny of the soul (*rūh*).

In Suhrawardī's cosmological scheme, there are ontological and anthropological dimensions. Concerning the ontological dimension, the word 'light' itself corresponds to the philosophical term existence in the sense of *actus essendi*, wherein Being or Existence is an all aluminous substance, pure luminescence and, in Corbin's opinion, the identification of light and Being is effected by conceiving light as *universalis*.⁶⁵ As for anthropological dimension, one can say as, Avens observes, "an-

63 Rahman, Prophecy 99.

64 Nasr, Sages 71.

65 Avens, Henry Corbin 5

thropology is only a phase of an angelology.”⁶⁶ It is by virtue of the angel that each human body, universe and everything in it exists. In fact, the whole universe for Suhrawardī consists of degrees of light and darkness. He calls the Absolute Reality the infinite and limitless divine essence, Light of lights (*al-anwār* or *nūr al a’zam*) the first effusion of which is the Archangel Bahman or the Nearest Light (*nūr al-aqrāb*). This light contemplates the Light of lights and receives the direct illumination from it. Through this illumination comes into being a new light which he calls triumphal light (*nūr al-qāhir*), which receives two illuminations, one directly from the Light of lights and the other from the first light. The process of effusion continues, as in Avicenna’s theory of emanation, in the same manner with the third light receiving illumination four times, twice from the light preceding it, once from the first light and once from the Light of lights. This is longitudinal order (*tabaqāt al-tūlī*) or ‘world of mothers’ (*al-ummanāt*) in which there are limitless Archangels and each higher light has domination or power (*qahr*) over the lower one and each lower light has love (*mahabba*) for the higher. Now, this longitudinal order gives rise to a new polarization of being, a new order of angels called the latitudinal order (*tabaqāt al-’ard*). These Archangels are called the lord of species (*arbāb al-anwā’*) or the species of light (*anwā’ al-nūrīya*). Each species has its archetype one of these angels or theurgy (*tilism*). These angels are concrete angelic hypostases and are the governors of this world who guide and direct all of its movements. They are the intelligences and the principles of the being of things. In turn, the latitudinal order of angels gives rise to the order of regent lights (*anwār al-mudabirrah* or *ispahbad*). This is the intermediary order that moves heavenly spheres and governs the species as the agents of archetypes. As for the species of human beings, its angel is Gabriel.⁶⁷

In his *Song of Gabriel’s Wing*, Suhrawardī makes all creation as manifesting the luminous Words of God meditating from His noble countenance. The first Word of God is supreme light, the last of these “greatest Words” is Gabriel from whom the spirits of all mankind came into existence, each as a Word of God.⁶⁸

In conclusion, one can say that in Islam and Islamic angelology nothing can be known or done without the involvement of angels, whether viewed in terms of religious belief system or from the philosophical point of view or from the perspective of mystical dimensions: nothing can happen without angels.

66 Avens, Henry Corbin 7.

67 Nasr, Suhrawardi 389-390.

68 Murata, Angels 329; Suhrawardī, Allegories 15.

Abstract

The focus of this article is to present a systematic account of angels and angelology in Islam and highlight their following aspects:

(1) In Islam angels enter into the very definition of the belief system. The most fundamental features of angels are provided in the Qur'ān and Traditions (ahādīth) which describe angels as performing eschatological and epistemological functions that become the foundation for the religious view of angels and angelology in Islam.

(2) In the medieval ages, under the influence of Neo-platonic thought, Avicenna and later philosophically inclined Islamic mystics developed a cosmological scheme in which the figure of angels plays a central role. Here angels perform cosmological as well as epistemological functions rather than God being the direct and immediate cause of them. Angels are conceived as intermediary between God and human beings, God and the universe and, for that matter, between God and everything. Without the involvement of angels nothing can be known or done: nothing can happen without angels.

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69 Generally, we have followed his translation with minor changes here and there when it was necessary.

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VII.

